

Is new camcorder technology serving as Big Brother's eyes?

(AP) — It is 1984-plus-7, and Big Brother isn't watching you: George Holliday is.

Before March 3, Holliday, a plumber, was best known for unclogging drains. But then he tested his new camcorder on a Los Angeles street, and instead of the usual mugging relatives — "HI, MOM!" — he recorded two minutes of police officers kicking, stomping and clubbing a defenseless man.

The attack on Rodney Allen King did more than turn a city on its ear and provide dramatic footage for the evening news.

It underscored a development George Orwell never envisioned: the emergence of Little Brother (or Sister), average folks who turn their video cameras on cops, crooks and each other, often with remarkable results.

About 14 million Americans now own hand-held video cameras; they cost as little as \$600, and some are so small they can be carried in a coat pocket. They can be used for weddings and baby's first steps; they can, and are, used to record prenuptial agreements and wills.

But they also serve as amateur arms of the criminal justice system:

- In Chattanooga, Tenn., a camera set up by a suspicious father caught baby sitter Donna Walterhouse slapping a 6-month-old baby. She pleaded guilty and got the maximum of 11 months and 29 days. "It destroyed her life," said her lawyer, James Purple. "We have developed a better understanding of the power of the atom bomb than we have of the video camera."
- In San Jose, Calif., William Kiley videotaped his own beating at the hands of a neighbor who previously had harassed him with anti-gay taunts. The 45-minute tape showed Kiley being pummeled by the fists and feet of Joshua Huff, 18. Huff was convicted of assault and battery on Aug. 13.
- In Fort Worth, Texas, a woman videotaped a policeman striking a handcuffed man 28 times, sometimes with two-handed blows. Officer E. J. Parnell was charged in July with assault with a deadly weapon. He said the car theft suspect kicked out a rear window and tried to jump out of the squad car.

Activist gay groups videotape their own demonstrations and the responses by police, as do anti-abortion groups.

"The camcorder is protecting us from Big Brother. This empowers the ordinary citizen in a whole new way," said Brenth Butterworth, senior editor of Video magazine.

But others worry that the gadgetry's power comes with the peril of invading privacy, of prying too far. For now, there are no legal restraints on neighbors videotaping neighbors, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Big Brother is now our neighbors, our employers, people we're dating, strangers on the street," the ACLU's Janlori Goldman said. "The danger comes when you are being videotaped against your knowledge and the information is later used in a manner harmful to you. Do we really want to live in a society where a video camera is aimed at every movement?"

"It's the greatest of all ironies, isn't it? We could lose our privacy by spying on each other," said George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley.

"Video cam operators are not a drooling class of voyeurs. They are ordinary people empowered by new technology to become an army of private gumshoes," Turley said. "The explosion of the video camera has led to a society under surveillance."

A case in point: the Gordon Heights Community Watch on New York's Long Island, which is using cameras to fight prostitution.

The community group intends to make tapes of men picking up hookers and send the visual evidence to their wives. "We want to make our community clean again," said video vigilante Carl Owens, who tapes from behind bushes. "If they don't stay out, let's go to the videotape."

A Tampa, Fla., couple has suffered a similar embarrassment. In July, a neighbor filming through their condo blinds videotaped them having sex. They were charged with lewd and lascivious conduct — punishable by 15 years in prison.

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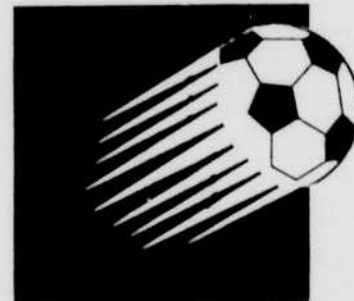


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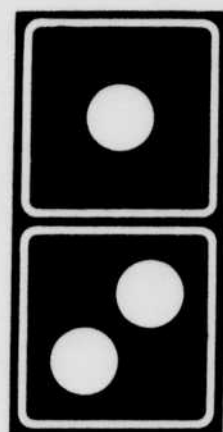
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